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ABSTRACT

A review of research about newspaper readership and circulation suggests that the key to understanding circulation patterns is to test in unison the solid predictors of readership (home ownership, population, income, media competition, and shared circulation) along with some of the more subtle correlates (such as social activity). Although these variables have not yet been tested in unison, enough evidence exists in the literature to support their combination. (Author/RL)

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Using Community Characteristics To Predict Newspaper Circulation

By Gerald C. Stone

HIGHLIGHTS: This review of research literature embraces more than 50 reports on newspaper circulation and readership. The author concludes that the key to understanding circulation patterns is to test in unison the solid predictors of readership (home ownership, population, income, media competition and shared circulation) and some of the more subtle correlates (such as social activity).

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Gerald C. Stone, assistant professor of journalism at California State University-Long Beach, was commissioned by the ANPA News Research Center to prepare this review.

How much influence does the community have on the readership or circulation of newspapers? This report is an appraisal of what we know, what we think we may know and what we quite obviously do not know about the relationship between newspaper use and elements of the local community.

The problem of self-defeating, gross generalizations must be recognized at the outset. It is simply impractical to equate one town with its neighbor and to proceed under the assumption that all principles which apply to the first also apply to the second. The same difficulty is certainly true for the newspapers in each of two seemingly similar communities. Yet even as the difficulty has no perfect solution, it is a mistake to discount the body of significant research which may apply in a very wide variety of both newspaper and community situations. This synthesis of the research literature

American Newspaper Publishers Association
The Newspaper Center, Box 17407, Dulles International Airport, Washington, D.C. 20041
Allen H. Neuharth, Chairman and President Jerry W. Friedheim, General Manager
Maxwell E. McCombs, Director, ANPA News Research Center

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will not be applicable to every individual circumstance, but the insights may be helpful.

Population

We begin with the most obvious area of comparison, that of *size* or, more specifically, *population*. Does community size influence the circulation-readership of newspapers?

Researchers have generally found that population is not closely related to circulation on a national scale. Peterson[31]* charted the population and circulation growth for the nation from 1929 to 1957, concluding that circulation gains did not keep pace with population gains during that time, although circulation gains were generally related to population gains in the 20-years-and-older age group—the reading public. Thorp[49] actually found a negative correlation between changes in population and circulation for the United States as a whole and reasoned that "more useful results are obtained when the newspapers and cities are divided into smaller geographic areas . . ."

Davenport's is the only macro-investigation[8,9] which seems to link national population with circulation trends for newspapers, but his findings are not supported by more recent research. McCombs' analysis[22] showed newspapers were not maintaining their share of the overall media market. Owen's series of tables[28] reflects the same conclusions, as do Bagdikian's.[4] Recent census data[52] show that daily newspaper circulation, which grew at a faster rate than population between 1920 and 1950, has grown at a much slower rate than population since 1950. All of these conclusions are based on data for the entire nation.

But it will seem undeniable to most that *a community's population is the single best predictor of a local newspaper's circulation.* Although there are noticeable exceptions, a cursory comparison between city population and total circulation figures in annual directories[2,14,43] will verify that circulation is limited by a town's population. Thayer[48] observed in 1954 that "the circulation of a newspaper is, first, affected by its particular location and the density of population of the city and surrounding territory. Hence, geography has a direct bearing upon circulation. . ."

This link between city population and circulation is well-documented in the field when approached on anything except a national level. In a study of 88 communities in Minnesota which included weeklies, semi-weeklies and dailies, a correlation (contingency coefficient) of +.85 was found between town population (ranging from 1,000 to 41,000) and circulation of the town newspaper.[27] A correlation of +1.0 would mean a perfect relationship between population and circulation. A recent study complements the finding with a reported correlation of +.64 between circulation and community population in a national random sample of 195 daily newspapers.[46] A study of 269 U.S. newspapers under 8,000 circulation, primarily weeklies, found a correlation of +.34 between the two variables—a much weaker, yet significantly positive relationship.[47]

Turpin[50] looked at circulation gains in 50 metropolitan counties and found that population gains alone predicted circulation gains with a very high level of accuracy. Although Turpin's approach does not provide a useable formula for an individual newspaper market, his is the single strongest evidence that circulation is indeed related to population. It must be emphasized, however, that most of these studies recognize the relationship is strong—but not powerful enough to attribute newspaper circulation to merely the number of residents in the city. In fact, the majority of researchers who have linked circulation with population have speculated that a combination of community-related factors will be a better predictor of circulation than community population acting alone—an idea that will be reexamined under future recommendations.

In any event, population is not an answer in itself. As Rucker and Williams[35] observed in 1955, "But size of population does not always determine the volume of circulation. Some communities with small populations have newspapers with large circulations, and some communities with large populations prove to be poor newspaper territory. This can only mean that internal population conditions as well as population numbers have a strong bearing on circulation."

Number of Households

Closely related to community population is the *number of households* in the community. This measure better approximates the actual newspaper readership potential by automatically including the family unit rather than the total population, thus adjusting for children who haven't yet adopted the newspaper reading habit as well as shared readership between spouses.

There is considerable overlap among studies that have used population and those that have used number of households as predictors of circulation or readership. Again, the analyses that deal with the entire industry or nation find circulation has not kept pace with the increase in population. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach[10] looked at diffusion trends for the major mass media and found that newspaper sales per household have declined at a steady pace since 1920. But when one focuses on smaller geographic areas than the nation, the number of

The footnotes refer to listings in the bibliography at the end of the report.

households is not as great a predictor of circulation as is owner-occupied homes.

Urban *owner-occupied households* were shown to be more than one and a half times as likely to be subscriber homes as were *renter-occupied housing* units.[16] Used in combination with length of residence, home ownership proved to have a "progressive and clear" relationship to newspaper orientation in a sample of 735 urban Seattle residents.[13] Rarick[34] used a household index composed of income, length of residence and owning the home as a predictor for newspaper subscribing. He found that 89 percent of the households scoring highest on his index subscribed to the local newspaper. The same household index was used by Denbow,[11] and again it was found superior to other approaches in predicting newspaper subscribing. The author tested each element in the index and reported income was the best individual predictor, followed by home ownership, then length of residence.

In Stone's community commitment formula,[46] the number of *single-family dwelling units* in the community was superseded as a predictor by community population, but neither of these measures was as good a predictor of circulation as the number of persons in the community who owned their own homes.

Together, *these studies support a view that the sheer numbers of residents who own their own homes in a community is highly predictive of newspaper circulation in that community.* Though this single variable is perhaps the most powerful predictor of circulation, the accuracy of prediction is enhanced by including other predictors such as length of residence and household income.

Length of Residence

Length of residence in the community is perhaps the most perplexing community variable related to readership. While length of residence has been identified as a predictor of newspaper use in many studies, it also has been found of insignificant value by almost as many other studies.

One of the earlier studies, that by Edelstein and Larsen,[13] found length of residence strongly associated with the probability of being a newspaper enthusiast. Janowitz[18] also found that length of residence—either in the community or in the individual's present house (the two were virtually the same)—increased the probability of newspaper readership significantly.

A recent study for Harte-Hanks Newspapers[57] stated: "Most industry research substantiates the fact that newspaper readership is conversely tied to residential mobility. You have to live in an area for a while before you are interested enough to read about it. Newcomers are often nonreaders."

Yet there is a body of research loosely linked under "discontinuity theory" which seems to indicate readership is at a potential high point during relocation of residences. Ruggels[36] found counties with out-migration experienced circulation losses, while movement into an area predicted circulation gains in that area. McCleneghan, *et al.*[21] found that students just entering college away from home increased their use of all media. Stamm, *et al.*[44] found newcomers to an urban area sought communication about the community which was often translated into newspaper use: the greater the individual's concern over moving, the more likely he would make heavy use of the newspaper (although "use" did not always mean subscribing).

Another point of view is offered by Bogart and Orenstein.[7] They found that residents of a central city surrounded by nearby publishing areas read a daily of the rim city if they had formerly lived there, thought they might move there, visited or shopped there or had someone in the family working there. According to this view, *primary ties with the community* are more important to newspaper readership than length of residence.

The same view is presented by Menefee[25] who wrote: "For trading and recreational activities, a person tends to travel to the city from which his newspaper comes, and conversely he prefers a paper which carries advertisements and news from the city which he visits most frequently." Park[29] adds that changes in community attachment are reflected in the circulation of newspapers; as society becomes more mobile, there is more evidence of circulation across traditional city limits.

But other researchers have found little relationship between length of residence and newspaper readership. Testing subscriber status against length of residence at present address, length of residence in the area and anticipated length of residence in the area, Schweitzer[39] found that the difference in length of residence between subscribers and nonsubscribers was not significant. Westley-Severin[55] did find a larger percent of non-readers among those residing at their present residence for less than four years, but length of residence was among the weaker predictors. *Until there is a better theoretical grasp of community involvement and readership, length of residence should be included in studies of newspaper readership.*

Income

The *income* variable is one of the most frequently documented predictors of newspaper readership.[8,24] Because it has received so much attention, income serves as a concrete example of the difficulties that exist in any attempt to associate community charac-

teristics with newspaper readership or circulation.

Beginning with the individual newspaper reader, higher income is associated with greater newspaper use. Stevenson[45] shows that family income is one of the most consistent predictors of newspaper reading frequency both in metro and non-metro areas. Income was a strong predictor in the Westley-Severin study,[56] in the Penrose, *et al.*, replication[30] and in so many surveys of individual markets that Poindexter[42] refers to a typical reader as a well-educated, middle-age person with middle and upper income. Income, then, is a predictor of newspaper use on an individual level: higher individual or family income is associated with greater likelihood of newspaper use.

Given this strong association, it is peculiar to find that income appears to lose its impact as a predictor when tested at levels beyond that of the individual family. Only Udell[51] was able to link newspaper growth between 1946 and 1970 with growth measures of the *national economy*, but these comparisons did not include circulation growth. And there are more studies which do use circulation or readership and find inequities with economic growth. Turpin[50] discarded the increase in personal income in his sample of counties as a predictor of increases in county circulation. Grotta[15] presented tables for the nation between 1950 and 1970 which show newspaper circulation increased 31 percent compared with a 35 percent increase in the gross national product at the 1950 benchmark year. By 1970, however, circulation had increased only 5 percent compared with a 94 percent increase in GNP. The finding indicates newspaper circulation is not related to gross measures of the nation's wealth.

In short, *income illustrates that a valid predictor at the individual level is not always a reliable predictor at the community or national levels.* Specifically, though family income is related to the family's newspaper use, it doesn't necessarily follow that the wealth of the community or even the mean income per person will be related to levels of newspaper circulation in the community. A related consideration is the difficulty in selecting a measure of community wealth. If mean personal income for the community is not an effective measure, might retail sales or bank deposits or number of retail outlets be a more effective measure? No studies have been found which attempt these approaches, so little evidence exists to suggest which of them might be worthwhile.

Education

A final consideration—but one which may be more important than those already discussed—is better illustrated with another variable, *level of education. Education has consistently been a positive predictor of newspaper use.* The relationship is not perfect, as studies (e.g., Westley and Mobius[54]) have shown some decrease in newspaper readership at the high end of the education spectrum, but education does correlate positively with newspaper use.[34,38] All of the studies, however, are based on surveys of individuals in specific markets.

When education is used as a variable on any higher level, it begins to lose its predictive power. In his study of under-8,000 circulation newspapers, Stone[47] was able to use median school years as part of a "relationship potential" scale to predict newspaper circulation in smaller markets. But he found that education measure was no longer viable when the same approach was attempted for a larger sample of daily newspaper communities.[46] In a random selection of 11 small markets, all under 10,000 population, the range in median education for the communities was from 9.7 years to 16 years, a spread of 6.3 years—enough variation in education to use it as a predictor of differences in circulation. But education level differences in the larger markets examined simply were insufficient to use as predictors of circulation. In 22 other markets with populations above 15,000, the range in median education was only 2.2 years.

Although education may best illustrate this difficulty, the same problem occurs at the community level for other variables which are powerful predictors at the individual level: age, occupation classifications, income to some degree, persons per household, percentage of community residents who own their own homes and percentage of population growth in the city over time. While all of these measures tend to correlate well with individual media use patterns, at the community level they lose their ability to discriminate and distinguish among differences.

One exception to this general finding should be noted. In 1944, Kinter[19] constructed a formula to explain variation in per capita circulation for all states between 1918 and 1943. Using statewide measures of income, urbanization and illiteracy (in that order), he was able to explain 66 percent of the per capita circulation variation. Kinter was able to achieve these results because of the substantial differences among these three variables.

Race and Social Activity

Both *race* and *social activity* are individual characteristics which may be worthy of future investigation. *Race is a readily available measure in all communities, and it has always been a strong predictor of newspaper readership.*[1] *Social interaction, especially church attendance,*[18,55,33] *also has predicted newspaper readership,* but this measure may only be approximated on the community level by the number of churches in the community or the ratio of

churches to population. Although neither race nor social activity should be of major importance in explaining community newspaper circulation, both might be a refinement to an index composed of other variables.

Community Type

Another factor to consider is *community type*, and though it is closely related to some variables already mentioned—population and households—it deserves separate attention.

Community type implies there are categories of cities which are so distinct from one another that no approach to circulation will be successful unless it recognizes these differences. Schramm[37] may have been the first to make this distinction, testing how much of a story the reader actually read in a small weekly newspaper, a small daily and a metropolitan daily. Admittedly, Schramm was more concerned with the type of newspaper than the type of community, but both are almost identical observations. MacLean[20] did use the community type in his attempt to chart media use patterns. Using the categories metropolitan, small city, village and farm, he found distinct differences in time spent reading newspapers and amount of content read.

Janowitz[18] identified five types of communities: hamlet, market town, county seat, regional city and metropolitan area. He found differences between these community types—but he also found more similarities among the ways their residents used the local newspaper.

Janes[17] theorized that community structure could be described through an analysis of the local newspaper's content. His suggestion was that the newspaper is a mirror of the community in a sociological sense rather than merely in the traditional journalistic sense. Janes believed the type of community would be reflected by its newspaper.

Following this theory, Stone[47] was able to distinguish among community types—metropolitan, suburban and rural—using only three indices: growth, prosperity and readership potential. These indices, including a total of 17 variables from census data, were able to place the newspaper publishing location in its proper community type and to predict the frequency of publication for newspapers in the sample.

Eberhard's study[12] also approached circulation from a city type design. Using population groupings, he found that circulation between 1940 and 1970 maintained a relatively stable level in comparison with the number of community households. But this stability was misleading because penetration increased in the non-metropolitan city group while penetration decreased in the large Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA). In non-metro areas, where population showed the lowest percentage increases, newspapers gained a higher percentage of readers; in large SMSAs which had experienced the greatest population percentage increases, newspaper circulation had the largest proportional drop.

Becker, *et al.*,[5] offered the common philosophy that "large communities are often thought to produce better papers than small ones, and growing communities better paper than declining ones." Yet in their search for correlates with newspaper performance, neither community growth nor market growth had any relation to press performance. Both Barnhart's and Peterson's trend studies[3,31] of the weekly newspaper field, Sim's analysis of population shifts[42] and Shaw's recent article on community newspapers[41] all support the idea that city growth will be important to the success of the local newspapers. Though growth seems a logical correlate with circulation, too many studies used growth variables in percentages and failed to establish a relationship between growth and circulation.[31,28,49]

The inability of growth measures to predict circulation may be fully explained by the inconsistency of the two measures: the former a measure of change over time and the latter a static measure taken at one point in time. Eberhard[12] found newspapers reaching the same percentage of homes in 1940 and 1970 despite big changes in community growth during the period. Stone[47] found growth rates for population and industry sales unrelated to circulation in small-circulation newspaper communities, and population-housing growth rates unrelated to circulation in daily newspaper communities.[46] Only Turpin[50] was able to show a significant relationship, and his method circumvented the inconsistencies in measurement by using percentage of change figures for all variables including circulation.

Competition and Media Use

The final variables necessary to any discussion of using community characteristics to predict circulation are *media competition* and *dual subscribers (shared circulation)* in the community. These elusive measurements have received only lip service in the studies on circulation, primarily because they are extremely difficult to quantify with accuracy.

Thayer[48] wrote of competition in 1954, "the competition offered by other papers is one of the most important of the economic factors affecting circulation." McCoy[23] had long before discovered newspaper survival was related to lack of competition as well as maintaining a population base, and Willey and Weinfeld[56] were among the first to write about the trend toward one-

newspaper towns. Since these early years, countless studies have traced the results of competition so that today's textbooks are able to pinpoint precisely the kind of print media mix that will be likely in a town of any given size.[26]

The competitive factor was best analyzed by McCombs[22] who pointed out that there is a limited amount of time and money that can be expected to be spent on the print media in any community. Most industry spokesmen would probably agree that the amount of competition for the readers' attention will be a factor that limits the readership-circulation of all print media in the community. Bagdikian[4] discusses the issue thoroughly and recognizes, with other media researchers,[6] that intermedium competition—newspapers against newspapers—is a limiting factor for each newspaper in a locality, while intermedia competition — newspapers against television, radio or magazines—is not as limiting. The more newspapers there are in a single market, the more likely each paper will suffer some circulation loss.

A corollary is that greater competition among newspapers in a community will increase the likelihood that readers' attention will be shared among local newspapers. This is the problem of dual subscribers or shared circulation, and it is one which has received little attention in the literature. Two recent studies did deal with dual subscribers, but they found little relationship between higher levels of dual subscribers and content-appearance of morning-evening newspapers.[53,40] Yet neither of these studies attempted to relate dual subscribers with circulation levels of the newspapers, nor did they deal with actual competitive situations, as their sample was almost totally joint ownership daily newspapers in monopoly publishing areas.

Recommendations

All of the studies which provide significant predictive formulas of newspaper circulation are based on combinations of variables which are themselves highly intercorrelated (both logically and statistically). The literature suggests that *the most effective potential approach to understanding the relationship between a newspaper and its community of readers will be one which blends city households (espcially those in which the owners reside), total market population, income (if it can be effectively computed for the community), competition and dual subscribers with a few of the more subtle individual correlates such as social activity.*

These variables have not yet been tested in unison, but enough evidence exists in the literature to support the idea that *this combination may be the key to understanding circulation patterns.* ■

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